

Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic

by Frank Karioris | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope,
Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT Amidst the despair, desperation, death, and economic deprivation of the pandemic, poetry—and creative outlets more broadly—have arisen to assist us in both making sense of the world at large, as well as addressing our own struggles during and from these challenges. This essay seeks to put these works into conversation as part of a process—along with quarantine—of seeding, an opportunity to grow new roots and networks. Drawing from a field of established literary journals and ones established during and explicitly to address the pandemic, the essay aims to begin a process of distilling the ways that even amongst fear and loss we must (and will) find ways to find joy. This requires us to seek out new forms of elegy that elaborate and understand the importance of relations and joys between peoples, and the new relational possibilities that our life holds for us as we move towards a post-pandemic world.

KEYWORDS pandemic, poetry, quarantine, joy, sociality, elegy

Introduction

In January, my best friend coaxed my clawed hands from the medicine cabinet. In February, I met my partner; January felt far away, a piece of some remote past. In March, the world ended. April is lonely.¹

So many of my students begin their papers with “Since the beginning of time,” yet here we are, seeing a moment where time truly seems to be at a new beginning; or, at least a form of restarting something. Time is never constant or consistent, but always perches, waiting for its moment. Writing this in November, nearly nine months since the fullness of the pandemic hit the United States in March, it seems that we have all lived a variety of lifetimes. Those of baking bread; those of unknowing; those of warm summer; those of panic; those dictated entirely by Zoom.



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Figure 1: Nightscape of East Liberty, Pittsburgh. Photo by author.

someday, we will remember the day we walked along the prom at the very beginning
of a pandemic, when the world was still motion & stillness had not settled, the
streets
not yet sterile & the chairs stacked on tables, dripping from rain not the spilled beer
of
students in their first Galway summers²

Amongst these lifetimes, there has also been the birthing of a new wave of literary journals dedicated to—and developed within—the pandemic. This essay briefly explores the ways that poetic responses to the pandemic might help guide us away from some of what once was and that might be best left in our oration of elegy, and towards new senses of self and relation as we move forward into a post-pandemic world. Here, quarantine is theorized as a seeding rather than a cutting off, as an opportunity to grow roots. Similarly, rather than seeing elegy as a mode of melancholy, it sees, as many cultures do, the elegiac as infused from its root with senses of joy, and the reality of a tomorrow. During the beginning of the pandemic, people spoke about the ways that nature was regaining, recuperating, and finding new ways to kind of come back to life; here the focus is on the recuperation of people, their spirit, and their relations.

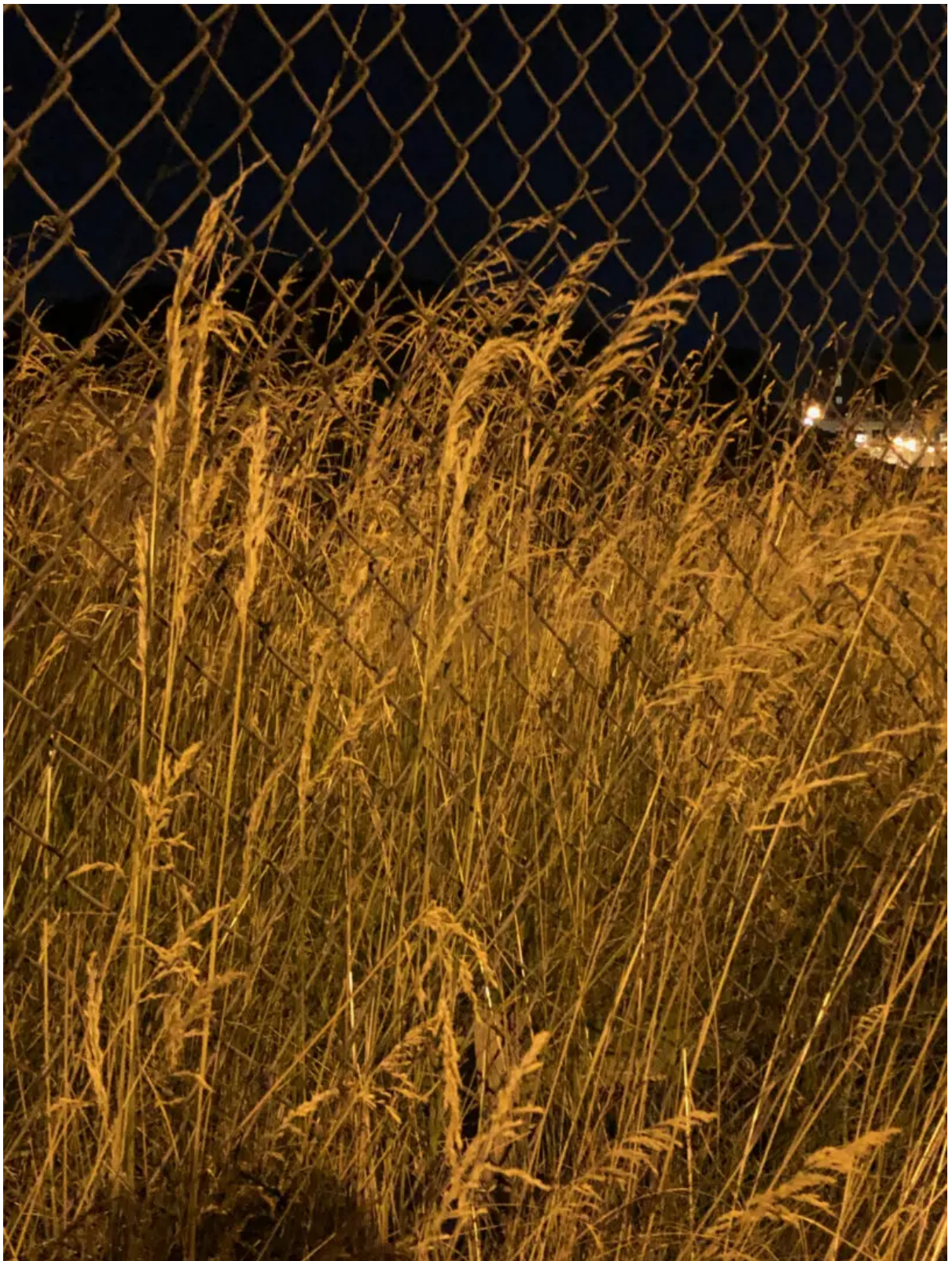
The essay utilizes pieces from a variety of literary journals and magazines³ that have either emerged to focus on the pandemic or have released special issues related to the pandemic to begin pushing at the boundaries of what we are working through with the pandemic. The essay builds on my previous research into social relations and worlds,⁴ as well as my own practice and learning as a poet. While this quarantine has created so much distance, it can be used as a way to understand the importance of relations between peoples, and new relational possibilities. In this, I hope to showcase the ways that writing is not simply a tool for explaining the current situation, but sets up strong roots for the importance of interrelationality and change as we move forward.

During the pandemic, any number of trends, fads, moments, and trajectories have emerged—and many, then, submerged. With so many people so online, the poetic blossoming has opened up a new capacity for individuals and groups to begin their own literary journal. They can range from formal and having all the accoutrements of a standard literary journal, to being haphazard and vanishing after publishing only a few pieces. In this essay, I cite a number of these journals that have emerged and whose focus is, in part or totality, the pandemic itself and our responses. In this, these journals build off of a long-existing online space for literary examination.

Relatedly, what we have seen is that, on the whole, during the pandemic, people are reading more.⁵ While there are not figures related specifically to poetry, it is notable that a poetry book (Amanda Gorman's *The Hill We Climb*)⁶ topped the *Publisher's Weekly* chart for multiple weeks in 2021.⁷ This is beyond uncommon and speaks to the way that poetry has been taken up during this period.

Lines of poetry from these new online poetry journals are interspersed throughout. Rather than examples for analysis, they are there as the scaffolding of the essay proper; they are a method of creating a world in the essay itself.

Rooting and Relations



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Figure 2. Long-grass blowing in wind against fence. Photo by author.

As we think back through how we have used our time of late—whether we call it quarantine, pandemic, or just 2020—we will have to begin working through what it was that we used it for. What, exactly, was it? But it is not simply what we made that is of consideration, but the simple fact that time itself bent and blew over in the breeze. We can begin to think about this time, following Jack Halberstam, describing queer, as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices.”⁸ While I imagine they hadn’t meant it for quite this purpose, I think it’d also be hard to argue that those words don’t describe the state of our time and world over the past months.

Amid the starkness of masks somewhere on the outside

beyond the trees and unused road,

with yeast, godlike particles,

I plough fresh tracks in flour,

pour out warmth in water.

I live a new innocence⁹

Rather than seeing quarantine and the act of quarantining as ineffectively the always-already negative, I want to have us—using the tools of the trade of creative writing—see it as a space of dormant rooting. In speaking about nature and people amidst it, Wendell Berry notes the pleasures to be found in simply coming into conversation with the landscape. “Such pleasure as there is, is here, now. Take pleasure as it comes.”¹⁰ The land and seeds and the bees that pollinate recognize the importance of moments of stillness, moments of fallow. One might suggest a comparison to Noah and the flood, and the way that the ark represents a quarantining built on seeding and the what-comes-next, rather than what is lost. What might it be to see this period as such a time for all of us?

did you know that many of the ornamental features of our favorite plants—

variegated leaves, vibrant colors, a pleasant and

dramatic curl—are the result of viral

infections?¹¹

This is not to omit or make light of the seriousness of the situation. We have seen poverty and unemployment skyrocket, and death is not a metaphor but a reality for many—including my dear friend Walter. If “Hell is a place on earth . . . [and] Heaven is a place in your head”¹² then we must continue the work of living amidst tragedy, grief, and a world full of struggle. As we write tomorrows, we should speak the elegies of today and yesterday. It is in this intertwining that this article pushes; the space where elegy is necessary, and where we must work to find joys—new and old—where we may.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/IMG_5749-Frank-Karioris.jpeg >

Figure 3. Beautiful bird / no longer for flight. Photo by author.

For our world is fraught with carelessness. Long before the pandemic “care services had already been slashed and priced out of reach for many of the elderly and disabled . . . homelessness had been on the rise for years, and increasing numbers of schools had begun dealing with pupil hunger.”¹³ *The Care Manifesto* continues, “Being cosmopolitan means being at ease with strangeness; knowing that we have no choice but to live with difference, whatever differences come to matter in specific times and places.”¹⁴ The manifesto lays out many of the issues that predate COVID-19, as well as how we must continue past these towards a tomorrow.

At the heart of it is the notion that togetherness, rather than disconnection or individualism, is at the heart of what will bring us out the other side. Not only will it break us of the moribundness of COVID, but that of neoliberalism’s entrenchment of selfishness and uniformity of mind. Here, again, creativity strings out not from the singular individual, but from the gasping voices of community.

In the same way that Ross Gay speaks to how looking for delight “occasioned a kind of delight radar . . . [or] delight muscle”¹⁵ we need to look towards delight—even when it is combined with fraught as a delightful dilemma. Poetry opens up avenues for challenging singularity—of emotion, of community, of love, of person—and allows us to come undone without splintering.

isn’t grief a form of love

pretend i am a parcel

pretend i am a splint undone—

a border underexposed with people,¹⁶

To continue our metaphor together, we must be a tree whose leaves are multitude—of shape, color, form, fit, style, and love. As seasons change into winter, the trees shed their leaves; yet they do not lose who and what they are, nor do the leaves disappear. Trees do not weep for the loss of their leaves. While they may take moments of reflection to honor the leaves now gone, this is a moment for understanding and reflection on the season, an elegy to those who have come and being together with what will come. They push beyond the specific iteration towards one that is not tied to the branch until it rots where it stands. We need to “foster connections between fractured insurgencies” that allow us to see the leaves, branches, bodies, and roots in connectivity with all those around them so as to refuse singular suggestions of the local.¹⁷



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EOOL9193-Frank-Karioris.jpeg> >

Figure 4. Pine and cones on cool fall day, Indianapolis. Photo by author.

I find myself gulping for air and digging fingers into her roots

Watching as a weird miracle vastly undoes us

I see the virus in the ground

showing what was

tangled in the ceiling

now in constant collapse

perfectly messy like

slowdowned hearts left beating at parties, and quiet shoes left at the poetry slams
and sex wrapping itself

up¹⁸

Scholars and writers of ecology have known for an extended period of time that our planet is not bounded to the fate which human action might seek to hold it to. "The wild will rescue life on earth, if anything does, because nothing else can."¹⁹ The soil knows what nutrients it needs, and shares with those all around it. As with the trees, so too with our social worlds. All the outpouring of writing should be a beacon to the fact that once, when the world has become safe(r) again, we meet out on front porch steps, or in classrooms, or on rooftops, we will be there together.

We buy things to keep us moving ,

isn't that what WE're told

to do? Now that you're here

we might find another activity—

or, more, maybe we will speak to

each other like life was meaningful

& we meant something, one another.²⁰

As Jodi Dean concludes their recent book *Comrades* by saying, while comrades (and therefore camaraderie) are not a magical solution to all the problems of the world, "it is the only form [of relation] through which these problems might be solved."²¹ It has been a long-standing contention that our relation to social lives and social relations is deeply inflicted by heteronormative constraints²²—in other words, too many people deprioritize their friends over romantic relations.

The quarantine has shone light on these relations between us, and the ways that poetry—amongst art writ large—is a media born of danger, challenge, and addressing those matters which are common to all of us. This is what Camus affirms when they say that “We resemble each other through what we see together, the things we suffer through together. Dreams change according to the person, but the reality of this world is our common ground.”²³

Conclusion



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/IMG_5895-Frank-Karioris.jpeg >







Figure 5. When stars fall; Enright Parklet, Pittsburgh. Photo by author.



















All of this essay has been an experiment in what hope and joy can and has done. The argument, if there is one, is that we need joy more than ever; but more than that, we need people. We need shared lives, shared loves, worlds that are not disposed of when they are difficult. For, as much as the poetry coming out during the pandemic has focused on all the struggles we are facing, and done so in tenors of elegy, the practice of putting them into the world is demonstration that there is some semblance of hope, of community, and of roots which we all are drawing upon.

We can both let the light in
Embrace and be done with it.
Develop our immunity
To fear.²⁴

Like so many things, many of these journals will be of their time; this is no worse than period pieces or rereading our old letters to now-former lovers. For some, like *infection house*, this time has already come. Writing—boldly and defiantly—though does not age. I have found repeated solace in the words of poets during the pandemic. They have reminded me, as Ferlinghetti says: “Poetry is not a sedentary occupation, not a ‘take your seat’ practice. Stand up and let them have it.”²⁵ Rather than “return to normal” as some are calling for, let us take this poetry—and the journals that house them—as first iterations of new growth from the forest floor, as an opportunity to break away from our rotting and towards a growth that is contingent and reliant on community, collaboration, and creativity. A move towards joy—a joy together, exuberant, and incorporating elegy. Let these virtues grow forth in all the tomorrows coming.

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Article details

Frank G. Karioris, "Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic," *Lateral* 10.2 (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.2.15>

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ISSN 2469-4053